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Benson, Louis F.
Papers of the Hymn Society
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THE PAPERS OF THE HYMN SOCIETY

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I

THE HYMNS of JOHN BUNYAN

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The Hymns of John Bunyan

It hardly occurs to us to think of Bunyan as a poet. But there is reason to believe that he so thought of himself, and that in saying, "Man's heart is apt in metre to delight," he described his own. Readers of *The Pilgrim's Progress* are aware that each part has a poetical introduction and the first a poetical conclusion also, and that the narrative has a way of breaking out into verse. Very few of its readers know of the considerable body of his writings in verse. His *A Book for Boys and Girls*, for instance, has some eighty pages of "Rhimes," and among his separate poems is one of fourteen hundred and another of two thousand lines. Bunyan's verse is often characterized as doggerel—which is hardly fair—and by one of his biographers as "respectable." It is best described as being didactic rather than poetic in motive and accomplishment, with here and there a strain justifying Bunyan's own estimate of his gift:

> "I could, were I so pleas'd, use higher Strains.
> And for Applause, on Tenters stretch my Brains."

Until very lately even less thought has been given to Bunyan as a hymn writer, either in fact or *in posse*. And there is no reason to suppose that he so thought of himself, although two lyrics in *A Book for Boys and Girls* are provided with appropriate melodies. In his day the Particular Baptists were in the thick of the bitter "Controversie as to Singing," with its special cases of conscience; 1st. Should there be any singing in God's House? 2d. If so, who should sing? and, 3rd. What should they sing? Bunyan thought singing in worship a divine ordinance, but that it should be confined to professed members of the church. Or so I interpret the 54th chapter of his *Solomon's Temple Spiritualized*. Whether, with Benjamin Keach, he favored the introduction of humanly composed evangelical hymns or, with Keach's opponents, stood by the metrical psalms, I am less clear.

We may safely say that Bunyan wrote no church hymns by intent, and that for two centuries the consideration of the availability of anything he wrote for use as a hymn was confined to some of his coreligionists, and in the church at large had no existence at all.

The best proof of this is the notice taken of Bunyan in the very inclusive *Dictionary of Hymnology*, by Dr. John Julian, published in 1892. Of its 1521 double-columned pages only eight lines are given to Bunyan, which read: "This great allegorist cannot be included amongst hymn writers, except that his piece, 'He that is down needs fear no fall,' from pt. ii of his *Pilgrim's Progress*, 1684, is given in a limited number of hymnals. The son of a mechanic, he was b. at Elstow, 1628; was a Baptist minister at Bedford; and d. in London, Aug. 1688."

Indeed, the hymnals here referred to were so few and so obscure that Doctor Julian's notice may be regarded as a waiver rather than a recognition of Bunyan's claim to be included there. Fifteen years later, in his second edition of 1907, Doctor Julian notes that the hymn, "Who would true valour see," was included in E. Paxton Hood's *Our Hymn Book*, 1873,[1] and more recently in *The English Hymnal* of 1906. *Our Hymn Book* and *The English Hymnal* were the most unconventional hymn books of their respective periods. Each in its turn sought to widen the horizon of an acceptable hymnody and each came freshly upon Bunyan's hymn in the search for unfamiliar material. *Our Hymn Book* included also Bunyan's "He that is down needs fear no fall." The only other piece of his to appear in later church hymnals is "Let the most blessed be my guide."

All three of these are from the lyrics mingled with the narrative of the Second Part of *The Pilgrim's Progress;* and it may be said with some confidence that they comprise all of Bunyan's verse available for use as church hymns. For school use the *Council School Hymn Book* (London, 1905) adopted his paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, beginning "Our Father which in Heaven art," from *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686, p. 8); just why is not very apparent. And if I were making an anthology of child-songs I should certainly wish to include the charming lyric, set to music on page 40 of the same book, beginning

> "My little Bird, how can'st thou sit
> And sing amidst so many Thorns!"

[1] Doctor Julian was evidently not aware that the hymn appeared in the first edition of *Our Hymn Book*, Brighton, 1862.

I

MERCIE'S SONG

(The Second Part, 1684: p. 20)

Christiana and her children have now begun the pilgrim life. Of her neighbors some would dissuade her, but young Mercie ("for she was but young") sympathized and would walk with her a little way this Sun-shine Morning, and is persuaded by her to accompany her to the Wicket Gate. Very soon Mercie falls aweeping as she thinks of her poor relations yet lingering in the sinful town. Whereat Christiana reminds Mercie that he that goeth forth and weepeth bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.

"Then" said *Mercie*,
"Let the most blessed be my guide,
If't be his blessed Will,
Unto *his Gate*, into *his fould*[2]
Up to *his Holy Hill.*
And let him never suffer me
To swarve, or turn aside
From his free grace, and Holy ways,
Whate're shall me betide.
And let him gather them of mine,
That I have left behind.
Lord, make them pray they may be thine,
With all their heart and mind."

A quaint and simple little lyric, and graceful, both in the spiritual and the artistic sense.

Dr. Joseph Belcher, in what *The Christian Examiner* (November, 1859) called his "superficial, feeble, inadequate, incorrect, and bigoted" *Historical Sketches of Hymns* (Philadelphia, 1859), is authority for the statement that this hymn "has very long been used in some of the Baptist churches in England at the admission of members, sometimes with very happy effect."[3] I do not know the source of Doctor Belcher's knowledge of the fact of its use, or his opportunity of estimating the happy effect. I do not happen to have found it in such Baptist hymn books, new or old, as I have examined, nor, indeed, in any hymn book except my own *Christian Song*. But I should agree

[2]"his fold," 1687.

[3]Dr. Henry S. Burrage, in his *Baptist Hymn Writers and their Hymns* (Portland, Maine, n. d.) p. 27, repeats this statement, but entirely upon Belcher's authority.

that such an use of these verses as Doctor Belcher suggests, might have a very happy effect. It seems to me one of the sweetest of pilgrim songs, in its phrasing and cadences, its simplicity of spiritual forelooking and its turn backward toward those left behind with a yearning that modulates indirect prayer into direct intercession.

II

THE SHEPHERD BOY'S SONG

(The Second Part, 1684: p. 100)

Christiana and her party have come to the Valley of Humiliation, in whose low-lying meadows many laboring men had found fruitful estates, for God who resisteth the proud, assisteth the humble. As they are going along they espy a boy "in very mean cloaths," feeding his father's sheep. And where he sat by himself he sang. And this is what the Shepherd boy sang in the Meadows of Humiliation:

"He that is down, needs fear no fall,
Philip. 4. *He that is low, no Pride:*
12, 13. *He that is humble, ever shall*
Have God to be his Guide.
I am content with what I have,
Little be it, or much:
And Lord, contentment still I crave,
Because thou savest such.
Heb. *Fullness to such a burden is*
13, 5. *That go on Pilgrimage:*
Here little, and hereafter Bliss,
Is best from Age to Age."

A winsome lyric of the submerged grace of doing without, that almost persuadeth one to be a Pilgrim. It is quite in line with Saint Paul's suggestion that a runner encumbers himself by carrying luggage, but it will neither appeal to the patrons of wealth nor become the favored song even of zealous book collectors. None the less it was the first of Bunyan's hymns to find a place in the hymn books: a place that is being recovered in some of the most significant of current hymnals. From the epochal *The English Hymnal* of 1906, where we should anticipate finding it, it is missing, but it is included in *The Oxford Hymn Book* of 1908, *Songs of Praise* (1925), and the

revised edition of *The Church Hymnary* (1927). And this hymn is the only one of Bunyan's versifyings to find a place as poetry in *The Oxford Book of English Verse* of Quiller-Couch.

The opening line has (presumably by intention) the force and familiarity of a proverb. It is pretty nearly identical with a line in Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*—

> "I am not now in Fortune's Power,
> *He that is down can fall no lower.*"[4]

And Butler's annotator[5] quotes from the Latin, "*Qui jacet in terram, non habet unde cadat*," and, from a Cavalier Song, "He that lies on the Ground, cannot fall." But it is interesting to note that Bunyan transforms a physical fact into an inward experience, and that what in Butler's poem was no more than Hudibras' ironical consolation of himself at escaping further downthrusts of fortune by reaching the bottom becomes at Bunyan's hand the parable of a spiritual grace.

III

VALIANT'S SONG

(The Second Part, 1684: p. 181)

Mr. Valiant-for-Truth, at "*the, enchanted—Ground*," has been explaining how he happened to come a pilgriming and how he overcame varied obstacles and the dissuasions of the prudent by keeping his eyes upon the goal:

"*Greath. Then this was your Victory, even your Faith.*

"*Valiant.* It was so, I believed, and therefore came out, got into the Way, fought all that set themselves against me, and by believing am come to this Place.

> "*Who would true Valour see,*
> *Let him come hither;*
> *One here will Constant be,*
> *Come Wind, come Weather.*
> *There's no Discouragement,*
> *Shall make him once Relent,*
> *His first avow'd Intent,*
> *To be a Pilgrim.*

[4] Part I, canto iii, lines 877-8. Here and elsewhere the italics indicate a free quotation.

[5] *Hudibras:* ed. by Zachary Grey. Cambridge, 1744.

Who so beset him round,
With dismal Storys,
Do but themselves confound;
His strength the more is,
No Lyon can him fright,
He'l with a Gyant Fight,
But he will have a right,
To be a Pilgrim
Hobgoblin, *nor foul* Fiend,
Can daunt *his Spirit:*
He knows, he at the end,
Shall Life Inherit.
Then Fancies fly away,
He'l fear not what men say,
He'l labor Night and Day,
To be a Pilgrim."

This dramatically virile song makes a great contrast with the two other hymns in technique, but in spirit is characteristic enough. For to Bunyan bravery is the root virtue of Christian character and the only possible equipment for the pilgrim life. But how far the song is an independent inspiration or how far suggested from outside has been questioned.

Perhaps Mr. Froude was the first to call attention to its likeness to one of Shakespeare's songs:

"Though the Globe Theatre was in the opinion of Nonconformists, 'the heart of Satan's empire,' Bunyan must yet have known something of Shakespeare. . . . The resemblance to the song in *As You Like It* is too near to be accidental."[6]

The song in the First Folio (Act ii, scene v) reads as follows:

SCENA QUINTA

Enter, Amyens, Iaques, & others

Song

Under the greene wood tree,
who loues to lye with mee
And turne his merrie Note,
vnto the sweet Birds throte:
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Heere shall he see no enemie,
But Winter and rough Weather.

[6]Bunyan in *English Men of Letters:* ed. New York, 1880, p. 93.

Iaq. More, more, I pre'thee more [followed by 27 lines of dialogue ending with Jaques "Come, warble, come"].

Song. Altogether heere
Who doth ambition shunne,
and loues to liue i'th Sunne:
Seeking the food he eates,
and pleas'd with what he gets:
Come hither, come hither, come hither,
Heere shall he see. &c.

The two sections appear to be one song in two stanzas, having a common refrain, but have been also regarded by musical composers as separate songs.

Froude further suggested that "Bunyan may perhaps have heard the lines, and the rhymes may have clung to him without his knowing whence they came"—a suggestion hardly in line with the earlier remark that "Bunyan must have known something of Shakespeare."

Dr. John Brown, most careful of the biographers who succeeded Froude, shares his confidence in the connection of the two songs, saying (in a footnote), "Bunyan had surely read Shakespeare's *As you like it*, and there met with this song:"[7]—and proceeds to quote (as Froude had done) the second part only of Amyens' song.

But when and where did Bunyan "surely read" *As You Like It?* One may say that in his youth he could not and that in his maturity he would not. Was ever youth more completely cut off from the world of books? "I never went to school, to Aristotle and Plato, but was brought up at my father's house, in a very mean condition, among a company of poor countrymen."[8] And was ever a mature writer so indifferent to the world of letters? "He does not seem," as Vice-Chancellor Baillie puts it, "to have read more than about half a dozen books in his life."[9]

There were the two books his bride brought (apparently her whole patrimony) to a cottage that had neither forks nor spoons —Dent's *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and Bayly's *The Practice of Piety*. "In these I should sometime read with her."

[7] *John Bunyan: His Life Times and Work*, Ed. Boston, 1888, p. 281.
[8] "Epistle to the Reader" in *Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded.*
[9] "The Mind of John Bunyan" in *The Hibbert Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 387.

These books led him not only to the parish church but to a deeper interest in the Bible that was to become his inseparable companion. The Authorized Version became the model of his style, but he must have had access also to a copy of the Genevan version, from which he often quotes. And with one or the other, very likely, the "Singing Psalms" of Sternhold and Hopkins were bound in: may be *The Book of Common Prayer* also. Then there was the ancient copy of Luther's *Commentary on the Galatians* he "happed upon" and valued highly, "so old that it was ready to fall to pieces in his hand if he did but turn it over."[10] Lastly, there was a copy of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, which he took to jail and which with the Bible constituted his library during the long period of captivity in which *The Pilgrim's Progress* was written. And this seems to fill out Bunyan's connection with books, unless we hold with some that *The Holy War* was influenced by *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*.

"One may indeed wish," the Vice-Chancellor goes on to say, "that Bunyan had had the first folio of Shakespeare with him during his long years in Bedford gaol." And the apparition, called up by this very odd wish, of the figure of Bunyan in his cell bending over a copy of the First Folio is so comical as to cast a ghostly light upon Doctor Brown's assurance that Bunyan had been reading *As You Like It* before composing Valiant's Song.

The Vice-Chancellor himself regards Froude's conclusion that Valiant's Song owed its origin to Shakespeare as "a very doubtful suggestion." A recent biographer of Bunyan, Professor Speight of Dartmouth, admits that he "*may have heard* Shakespeare's 'who doth ambition shun,' but the indebtedness was limited to a word here and there."[11] This disclaimer, or even this limitation, of Bunyan's indebtedness to Shakespeare is somewhat surprising. I should have supposed that any student or practicioner of verse would feel instinctively that Bunyan's song is not an independent creation but is related to the earlier one in its manner of approach, its opening line, its movement and lilt, and its imitative phrasing.

But Professor Speight's suggestion (reminiscent of Froude's alternative explanation) that Bunyan "may have heard" rather

[10]There was a number of editions in English, beginning with 1575.

[11]*The Life and Writings of John Bunyan*, by Harold E. B. Speight: New York, 1928, p. 171. The italics are mine.

than read the song in *As You Like It* is altogether likely; and that he heard it often and himself joined in singing it, in his unregenerate days, is also likely enough. The rising tide of Puritanism had not quenched the English love of singing and of the dance.[12] And it is quite clear that as a youth Bunyan loved to join the singing in the village alehouse and without, and in the dancing on the village green. Among the more popular and often printed of the tunes then used both as song and dance, was a melody entitled "Under the Greenwood Tree," but the natural inference that this tune was to Bunyan the familiar setting of Shakespeare's lyric seems to be open to some question.[13]

However that may be, the time soon came when Bunyan regarded the songs and dances of the alehouse and the green as carnal indulgences to be foregone, and he has himself told us of the real distress he felt in abandoning them for conscience sake. And I would suggest that if we set Bunyan's hymn against this background of his familiarity with the current "carnal songs" and his experience of their delight, we have the probable explanation of its motive and origin.

What seems to me most likely is that Bunyan knew Amyens' call to "come hither and lie in the sun," shunning all ambition to forge ahead and freed of all enemies except winter weather—knew its popularity and charm, and disapproved of it very heartily; and that he essayed to rebut it with a call to come hither and be a pilgrim and fight the foes of the pilgrim life,

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[12]Many English folk songs date from Bunyan's time.

[13]Mr. Louis C. Elson in his popular *Shakespeare in Music* (Boston, v.d., pp. 60-63) prints the tune "Under the Greenwood Tree" as the oldest setting of Amyens' Song (the words of which he runs through the braces), "very popular in the seventeenth century and very probably used by Shakespeare." But Mr. Elson has, as he says, copied the song from *A Collection of National English Airs*, edited by W. Chappell, and published in London in 1838 and 1840. Chappell, it is true, prints the tune "Under the Greenwood Tree" as No. LXI in his 1840 volume, with the words of Amyens' song set to it, but in the 1838 volume, which contains his "Remarks on the Tunes," he says (page 21) that owing to the great vogue of the tune and to the similarity of the titles he was led to suppose it to be that to which Shakespeare's words were sung, but he now thinks that a song in D'Urfey's *Pills to purge Melancholy*, called "The Countryman's Delight," "appears to be the original." This raises difficulties. Did Chappell still think so when he printed Shakespeare's words to this tune in his second volume, apparently two years later? And if, as he says, he made no changes in the air of any tune, how could this air be used with "The Countryman's Delight," which is in a different metre,—

("In Summertime, when Flowers do Spring,
And birds sit on a Tree,")

and has its own proper tune in D'Urfey? The song, however, does contain the line, "Under the Greenwood Tree."

I have read Chappell's note many time without resolving these difficulties.

that should not be literally a parody of the "carnal song" but should suggest it by vivid contrasts of matter presented through intended likeness of manner.

If this be so, Bunyan's motive was at one with that of the writers and compilers of the collection of metrical versions of Psalms bound up with current Bibles and Prayer Books, that were offered (as the title page of *The Whole booke of Psalmes* read) "for godly solace and comfort, laying apart all ungodly songs and ballads, which tend onely to the nourishing of vice and corrupting of youth."

But in method Valiant's Song was nearest akin not to the current Psalm versions, but to the earlier ballads of the Scottish Reformation, as gathered in *The Gude and Godlie Ballates* of the Wedderburne brothers, which spiritualized current "fleshly songs," while retaining much of their phrasing, such as

"Quho is at my windo, quho, quho?
Go from my windo, go, go.
Quha callis thair, sa like a straingair?
Go from my windo, go!" . . . .

"With huntis vp, with huntis vp,
It is now perfite day,
Jesus, our King, is gane in hunting,
Quha lykis to speid thay may." . . .

"Hay now, the day dallis,
Now Christ on vs callis,
Now welth on our wallis,
Apperis anone:
Now the word of God regnis,
Quhilk is King of all kingis
Now Christis flock singis,
The nicht is neir gone." . . .

It remains to consider the text of Bunyan's song from the point of view simply of its acceptability for use as a church hymn.

Its discoverer, Paxton Hood, in 1862, made only two slight changes (other than the inevitable amelioration of the punctuation), which are no improvement and read as though they

might be slips of a copyist's pen. Its restorer, *The English Hymnal* of 1906, made so many that they almost amount to a reconstruction:

"He who would valiant be
'Gainst all disaster
Let him in constancy
Follow the Master.
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

"Who so beset him round
With dismal stories,
Do but themselves confound—
His strength the more is.
No foes shall stay his might,
Though he with giants fight;
He will make good his right
To be a pilgrim.

"Since, Lord, Thou dost defend
Us with Thy Spirit,
We know we at the end
Shall life inherit.
Then fancies flee away!
I'll fear not what men say,
I'll labour night and day
To be a pilgrim."

No doubt it was a little daring to propose for Anglican use so unconventional a hymn as Bunyan's, but when you have stripped it of its rude vigor and quaint charm, was the dare worth while? And yet this conventionalized text was followed in that least conventional of hymnals, *Songs of Praise* (London, 1925).

On the other hand, Bunyan's text is followed literally in *The Oxford Hymn Book* (1908), *The University* (of Toronto) *Hymn Book* (1912), *The Congregational Hymnary* (London, 1916), *School Worship* (London, 1926), and *The Church Hymn-*

ary (Revised edition, London, 1927). *A Students' Hymnal* (London, 1927) prints Bunyan's first stanza across the page, followed by the original and the English Hymnal text of stanzas two and three in double columns for alternative use.

To my mind the crux of the original text is the line "Hobgoblin, nor foul Fiend." It is so stuttery in the mouth and perhaps calculated to raise a laugh from many of those in our congregations. In *Christian Song* (wisely or unwisely) I changed it to read, "No goblin nor foul fiend." Personally I prefer the original.

The list of hymnals above given shows how rapidly Valiant's Song has found a place in the outstanding English hymnals appearing in the last quarter century, and preferably in the original text. Our American hymnals are as a rule less hospitable, and perhaps reflect the reluctance to learn anything new that has fallen upon so many of our respectable congregations. But the song is found in *The Riverdale Hymnal* (1912), *The New Hymnal* of the Protestant Episcopal Church (1916), Mrs. Date's *Hymns for Worship* (1927), and Augustine Smith's spicy *The American Student Hymnal* (1928). All four books have used the conventionalized text of *The English Hymnal* instead of Bunyan's own. This, it seems to me, is a great pity. It is easy to understand why these changes of text were proposed. The original is not a song of praise or a hymn of edification but a spiritual challenge delivered dramatically: and like most challenges it carries an implication of boastfulness. *The English Hymnal* text does get rid of that effectively, but it does so at the cost of turning the dramatic monologue of Valiant into a descriptive eulogy of valour, much after the manner of the first Psalm.

It is at all events not worth while to go into the matter of a suitable tune for Bunyan's hymn until we have made up our minds whether we want a setting of a dramatic challenge or of a descriptive eulogy.

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